Aliens

The large courtyard began to fill with dark skinned people. Dressed like europeans going to church. Rostrum seats were filling up. Bishops, priests and nuns in roman ‘clergy’ attire. All colours of skins. A large modern looking school peeped in the background. Out in the ‘wilds’ with only a large visible dirt track leading in. The hot South African sun blazed.

Drums played tinny sombre music over the tannoy system as the video camera swung towards the open gates. Escorted by small neatly dressed children, the black limo was arriving. All dressed

alike. Waving in formation, wooden sticks, not unlike Irish hurleys. Sitting glued to the seats in our living room. All alone. Close to tears in disbelief.

As the coffin was removed, it was set to rest in the centre of the yard. Seeing her face sad, bewildered and tired, the nun who once visited us a year ago looked broken.

The wooden box sitting on its tressel held many memories and secrets of that snuffed out corpse. Those remains. My handsome brother’s life. Now bones and decay. When the lid was opened, to my surprise, the camera up

close, showed his battered face. More tears flowed then as the once carefully arranged flowers were also wilting, dying in those photo frames.

Watching, transfixed, the hundreds of alien sad folk marched passed. Paying homage to the man who changed their lives. Who guided those children from the wilderness of Bandliercop in South Africa through this school. Giving them a purpose in life. He was ‘theirs’. Their hero.

My wounded heart deepened as I watched on. Mass began then. With all its trimmings. The choir started to chant its prepared

music as the cruel camera continued to film. None of us were there. His Irish family.

Suddenly a lovely woman stepped up to the microphone. She was very pretty. Sedately dressed. With a fine head scarf falling loosely around her shoulders like a nun’s veil. The music changed as she sang Patrick’s favourite song. That sad romantic song.

“My young love came to me.
She came softly in…”

As the tears flowed, my mind tuned out. Reminiscing on his

visits to home. The fun. The craic in our Ceili house. My sister in law rang me that spring evening of February. That last day of the month.

“Phil,” she shouted, “something awful has happened.” I knew or thought what she was going to tell me. We were returning from holidays in Dublin. We had taken the country route home which brought us through my hometown of Keady. Passing our old, now closed, cycle shop, we saw lots of cars with people, two and froing, between it and the barber’s shop. My friend Marie’s husband was ill with cancer.

“We know what has happened,” my Michael stuttered. “Paddy has died.” My reply was “yes” as we slowed down. “No need to stop now.” “We’ll return tomorrow when things settle.” “Too young to die.” “Poor Marie,” I added sadly.

“Yes,” Geraldine my sister-in-law replied. “That was yesterday.” “There is something else we need to tell you,” she continued loudly. “Pat has died.” “Our Patrick.” “We just got the news from South Africa this evening,” she blurted out. The two friends, Paddy and Pat dead. Dropping the phone off the wall, Michael caught me sinking to my knees in shock.

Noreen, our older sister coped with rage. Rage that Pat was being buried in Africa. She homed in on the De La Salle Christian Brothers top administration. Demanded his coffin returned to Ireland for burial.

Reverend Brother Patrick Toner was buried in the graveyard at Castletown, County Laois, Ireland. His grave one of many deceased Brothers. After a mass in Keady Town, Northern Ireland. We followed the funeral cortege all those fraught miles to the province of Leinster. Sister Sally did not come.

A few years later, Sally arrived on a visit. So delighted our family were to finally meet. She had a story to tell.

A young pupil had wandered off with friends, outside the compound. A stagnant pool there was enticing that hot summers day under the African sun. That deep pool was deceiving. There were lots of clingy wilting foliage debris at its edge. Lethabo got caught in the debris. He drowned. That young lifeless body did not recover despite Sally’s prolonged resuscitation skills. Disease was rife in that water. Sister Sally succumbed to its illness.

As she recovered, Brother Pat and his teacher friend set off from that far off place to bring her back. The journey was long to the hospital. Traffic was light when the accident happened. Brother Patrick was not wearing his seatbelt when the car crashed, plunging into a ditch. He died almost instantly. His companion survived. His belt intact.

Many years later. With my daughter, we visited those places. Visited his school. Met Sally again. All his work companions and friends. The line up to shake hands. To hug, commiserate and recall stories was unexpected in the school dining room in South

Africa. Most of his colleagues and friends continued to live. To work there. No longer aliens. Just lovely people. Sister Sally keeps in touch. We are friends on Facebook. All those memories flood back from time to time. All the good ones too. The music, the ceilis and the craic.